

Summer days drifting away by tml1

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Summary:

"Mike Wheeler is very much untouchable, at least to Will Byers. As the slow descent from summer heat begins; a sickly sweet August to a chillier September, the leaves becoming crisper, turning the ever vibrant warm tones, the school year starts again. Complete with shrill bells and messy hallways littered with paper, Will can't help but wonder if maybe they'd see each other again, maybe in some other life, even with Mike gone."

A story about falling in love and a summer fling that leads to something more.

1. before

Author's Note:

Full disclosure: I hate Grease. (I know I'm an enormous hypocrite.) But yes, anyway, I am not a fan. However, a while back I had the idea for a very loose Grease AU. I had started planning it as a multi-parter, until I realized that it just... didn't work as a fully fleshed-out concept. Like I'd get to the end of Grease (the worst part, imo) and the whole thing fell apart. But then I totally re-worked it and thought I'd give it the good old college try. Don't know how well it worked out, but I need to get it out of my system. Hopefully it's not as fucking awful as I think it is :)

“So you've been listening to Bowie?” Will asks through a knowing smile.

“Here and there. Pretty good.” It's a lie, and an obvious one, and one look at Will's face lets Mike know he hadn't fallen for it. “Okay, *yeah, all the time.*”

“Just *Heroes* ?”

“Yeah? I... is there more?”

Will doesn't say anything, just opens his jacket and reaches into the inside pocket. He pulls out three cassettes. *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, *Hunky Dory*, and *Aladdin Sane*. Mike picks them up, staring at the covers, the wild colors.

“You just have these around?” he mutters.

“For my Walkman,” Will explains. “But you can borrow them for awhile.”

“No, these are yours. I can’t just...”

“It’s cool. I don’t mind.” Will smiles at him. It's funny how Will could sometimes look so hardass on the outside, like he’d clock you for looking at him, but the smile would change it all. It's a good smile. Honest.

“Are you sure?” Mike asks, although he is already running his thumb over the cover of Aladdin Sane. Bowie’s eyes are closed, and there is a lightning bolt painted across his face. His hair is bright, artificial red, and swooped up in a mullet. He’d seen the album cover before - he isn’t an idiot, he’s been to stores. But at the moment he feels like he's holding something illegal.

“See? You’re already a fan,” Will quips.

Mike swallows, and nods.

He realizes he’d been staring at Will for far too long. He keeps doing that.

“Hey,” Will starts, and grabs a pen from inside his jacket.

What doesn't he carry in his jacket? Jesus.

“I’m gonna need those cassettes back eventually, right?” Mike nods. Will holds out the pen, and Mike takes it without thinking. But he keeps holding his hand out, turning his palm-up. His fingernails are painted jet-black.

Mike holds the pen out, unsure of what to do. Will leans a little forward. “Write your number, I’ll call you sometime this week.”

“To get the cassettes back,” Mike states, shallow breaths clouding his brain.

“Yep,” Will says, nodding at Mike like he’s the slowest person in Indiana.

He reaches up to cup the back of Will’s hand with his own, so he can write better. His fingertips graze Will’s knuckles, and he feels like his hands are made of static electricity. When he presses up, Will presses back, and he half-expects his hair to stand on end, like in freshman year science and that weird machine.

With sweaty palms, he scribbles out his number, screwing up the five and having to cross it out and write again. He pulls away, and his hands feel like they’re on fire, like the electricity has been trapped there and now he’s aware of every square inch of his skin.

Will reads the number on his hand and grins at Mike. "See you soon, Wheeler."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem," he says back. Mike can hear the half-smile in his voice, and wished he couldn't. "Check out Bowie sometime."

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Mike is leaving tomorrow.

The summer is waning and he's going back home. Back home he'll be ducking his mother's concerned and knowing eyes, (and the guilt that comes with it), back to deflecting his father's lukewarm attempts to reconnect. Back to pretending that he can look at girls and feel anything more than maddening disinterest.

Back to life before Will.

They're sitting side-by-side on the sand, bare feet submerged in water that's a little too cold for comfort. Mike feels like he's spent the entire

summer—lived an entire life—right here at this lake— *lovers lake*—with Will’s solid presence warming him from the inside out, talking about everything and nothing. Stupid shit—parallel universes, horror movies, and rock music—he once said his brother put him onto when he was seven.

(Mike’s “*diagnosis*” and what came after, breaking up his friend’s relationship, and not fully understanding why he did it. Trying to kiss one of his closest friends, being pushed away, and understanding *perfectly* well why he did it.)

Mike’s hand inches over, gentle fingers brushing Will’s hand where it sits between them.

“I think I’m transferring schools,” he says softly, and Will hums in acknowledgement.

He doesn’t ask where, because they don’t talk about things like that. Tangible things that make their looming problems—and the impending distance between them—all the more real.

“Are you okay with that?” Will asks when Mike’s hand moves again, completely covering his own.

He shrugs, and feels a tiny thrill at the fact that Will knows these things now. “Can’t go back to my old school,” he murmurs. “No other choice, really.”

It's not entirely true, but he knows better than to say it again. Will already knows.

Mike can feel the weight of Will's eyes on him, and when he turns his head, the intensity of the heavy gaze sends a shock of warmth down his spine.

Will lets out a shaky exhale. "I don't want you to leave," he whispers, and Mike feels it, deep inside, in his bones and under his skin, coursing through his veins.

I don't wanna leave, either.

But he doesn't get the chance to say it out loud, because suddenly Will is leaning in, and Mike's face is turning up to meet his, magnetized, like he can't help it. Like it's the easiest thing in the world.

And then their lips are brushing—once, twice—and Will's other hand is coming up to sweetly cup Mike's cheek, and then they're kissing for real.

It's molten hot and silky soft, and Mike feels like he's drowning and flying all at once, like he's free-floating in space and safely tethered to solid ground, right where he's supposed to be for the first time in his life.

He feels... *golden*.

Will pulls back eventually, eyes shining the softest brown infused with green in the sunlight. Mike instantly craves the heat of him, wants Will's mouth back on his, tender and sure.

He wants everything.

He wants *this*, wants desperately to cling tight to the summer, for as long as he can hold on.

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Will's summer went against everything.

He couldn't tell his mother about watching sunsets on top of the movie theater roof, or the sharing of ice cream cones by the lake, or the boy with dark chocolate eyes and slight underlying Milwaukee accent.

Simply put: he couldn't say anything to anyone. Not even to his closest friends, Dustin and Jane. Because admitting he had feelings and spent the summer with gentle touches and soft kisses?

They wouldn't get it.

And he doesn't let people in easily. This is evidenced by the fact that the two closest people to him are his blood relatives. With the inclusion of the friends he has, Dustin he's known since forever—they were friends before he even knew what friends were—and Jane who was included in their little pair, only a few years later.

So, Mike Wheeler is was *different*.

Dustin is driving his mom's car, as he always does. Jane is sitting in the passengers seat, while Dustin is staring with his dumb heart eyes and Jane is prattling on about her new neighbor. Eric Klose. He's from France and while Will could admit the guy was easy on the eyes, he doesn't really give a shit.

Mike Wheeler. Will repeats the name to himself over and over again. What was even the point of the entire thing? So Will could painfully pine from three hundred miles away?

Will checks back into the conversation when it turns to him. Jane has been obsessed with the fact that he's been MIA all summer. She wants details and a love story and Will just can't give her that. It was all over just as soon as it had started.

"I spent the summer with someone," he says. Jane's eyes widen with hope, that same expression she had on the day he met her in the second grade, and Will only feels a little guilty about smashing that glimmer of hope to pieces. "It was nothing serious, with nobody important."

Jane deflates just as Will predicted and the remainder of the ride to

Mary's Diner is silent.

The rest of the day is monotonous. He paid somewhat attention to what his friends were saying because actually hearing the material is necessary for his memory to do what it's supposed to but he didn't put in any more effort into the conversation than that.

It comes up once again right as they hit the parking lot just outside.

His argument is even weaker than he thought, apparently, because Jane scoffs. "I don't believe you," she proclaims, poking Will in the cheek because she's the worst. "Look at your face, you're all red."

Dustin grins, a shark scenting blood. "He does look red," he chimes in, nudging him hard, and then they both start up a loud, irritating chorus of *Will's got a crush* and *ooooooh* like they're back in the fifth grade, and they're shoving at his shoulders and ruffling his hair, and the panic starts to bubble up, thick and sharp.

He can see now that there's no easy way out of this, no way out that won't bury him deeper in bullshit, won't tangle him up in more tenuous lies.

"Fine," he snaps, smacking their hands away. "Like I said there... may have been someone."

Someone with a dick.

“I knew it,” Jane says triumphantly, smiling at Will like she’s actually happy for him, like she wouldn’t be utterly disgusted if she knew the truth.

Dustin jostles him playfully from behind, a smile on his face. “Go on, then,” he says. “Tell us about it.”

Not a chance in hell. “There’s nothing to tell.” Will responds, hoping his shrug comes off as casual. The words feel weak, even to him, and if anyone gets a good look at his face, he knows it’ll be plain as day. “It was... whatever.”

Dustin groans. “Come on, man, we need details,” he presses. “What was she like?”

Tall. Funny. Oddly charming. The kindest person I’ve ever met.

Not a “she.”

“Pretty,” Will finally says. It’s not a lie... not really.

It’s somehow enough for them, though, because they’re opening and shutting their mouths, glancing suspiciously at one another, poised to stop hounding at him.

-

Will isn't sure of most things.

He isn't going to graduate with straight A's, go on to a prestigious ivy league university, and most of all marry a woman. He doesn't know the answer for most things even if he makes it seem as if he does.

But he is *sure* that he's going to go to New York at the end of the school year to live with his brother. Honestly, that's the only thing keeping him sane most of the time. Thinking about his future. How things will be for him then, in New York, out of the small-town that is Hawkins.

Naturally, Mike Wheeler was still confusing to him. Mike Wheeler was not certain, just like him, but in a different way. He was kind and fun, but also temporary and risky. And Will Byers doesn't take risks very often.

They had met in woods—an *odd place, but the place they met nonetheless*—where he had blushed profusely. He was all sharp edges and twinkling eyes. And it turned into *something*. Then they walked for what felt like ages, talking about anything and everything they could think of.

Will began to control his feelings a bit more, however, his crush only seemed to intensify. Mike occasionally would come to Bradley's on Will's afternoon shift or when he had to get groceries, lovesick smirk on his lips with a cigarette behind his ear, offering to carry his bags

out the parking lot and drive him home.

He didn't admit it to himself, but he knew what it was.

Absentmindedly stocking the shelves at the supermarket, he'd think of what movies Mike might like. Driving through Hawkins at night, aimless, taking the same turns five times over, he tried to pick out which house could be his, which bedroom window he could be looking out of. The same cassettes on repeat, the same songs he mouthed the words to. The palm of his left hand, where he still ran his fingers over the grooves of his skin before sleep.

Will felt himself slipping away sometimes but he knew Mike would be the one slipping away for good at the end of the summer. He would be going back to Wisconsin. They already said their goodbyes, and he had decided that cutting contact with Mike was the smartest move for him, back when he thought he would never see him again. And he told Will he would never forget him and Will *promised* to call.

Finally, Mike moves to get in the car. His father is in the driver's seat and his mother in the passengers, and his little sister, Holly, is tucked into a seatbelt in the back. They're not paying much attention, but rather arguing with each other.

He hates it.

Will hates that he loves the way Mike looks in the sunlight—his eyes are like dark honey, light around the edges. It's like the entire world—the entire universe, loves Mike Wheeler and can't help but show it.

He's a vision, he always is, sunlight dances off of his skin like the halo to a daydream, his milk chocolate irises sparkle gold hazel imbued in the brilliance of the rays—rays so glaring they're meant to expose flaws, but he remains flawless nonetheless, perfect; at least, this is the dazzling light Will sees him under.

Just like liquorice to the taste, he craves the sweetness of him like melting molasses, amber honey dripping between his fingertips, silk skies pouring soft plush snow.

And it all goes to waste, the ambrosial sweetness of it changes, turns pervasive. It's making him sick.

Because the more affected Will gets by this, the more he cares, there's irrationality in his logic. And perhaps there is a trickle of hate searing there, another moral truth he isn't ready to face.

Because he doesn't want these slow motion double visions pigmented in rose blush. Because he doesn't like that falling feels like flying... until his bones inevitably crush.

In the end, he doesn't utter anything more substantial than, "I'll miss you." And Mike reaches out and squeezes his hand before ducking into the car.

Just like that, Mike was gone. Who had kissed Will, held his hand, smiled, and told him he'd always hold a special place in his heart, was gone.

But, really, it was what it was. It was just Mike Wheeler. He could get over Mike Wheeler.

He didn't have the nerve to call Mike. He was terrified of admitting to himself that he felt something for the guy that was only supposed to be a *fling*. He was supposed to be forgotten at the end of the summer. No harm, no foul.

Mike Wheeler is very much untouchable, at least to Will Byers. As the slow descent from summer heat begins; a sickly sweet August to a chillier September, the leaves becoming crisper, turning the ever vibrant warm tones, the school year starts again. Complete with shrill bells and messy hallways littered with paper, Will can't help but wonder if maybe they'd see each other again, maybe in some other life, even with Mike gone.

So yeah, Will thinks often about him. It's hard not to. He hopes that Mike is doing okay. He deserves at least that much.

Will misses him. He really does. This summer was one of the best he'd ever had, and he misses that rush.

Another school year, and Will isn't happy to take part in the ritual. Especially after a summer like this: straight from the lake visits—just him alone or with Mike—where he could start his day in the mornings, bathe in the water in the afternoons and sit on the cool sand with 'till the late hours of the night. The last two months have been as good as could be.

But here he is, already dreading the familiar routine, a week and a half into Senior year, hoping to maybe move on from thinking about Mike Wheeler, and the memories they made—

The strong grip of his hand as they ran from the cops who crashed the party.

The softness of Mike's lips with a sweet lemonade aftertaste.

The silver glow on their skin in the moonlight that slipped through the cracks in the lake.

The crack in Mike's voice as they said their goodbyes.

But the universe finds it funny to mess with Will's in life as he exits Classic Literature, (thankfully he shares a bunch of classes with both Dustin and Jane this year,) and the words couldn't leave his mouth at a weirder timing; as he turns back to where *he's* standing by a locker with two other people.

He recognizes one of them as Max Mayfield, the skateboard riding, self-proclaimed stoner, she's like the classic jock, the lightweight protecting the pack—the pack meaning those who are the odd ones out, the ones going against the grain—she dunks on anyone that so much as looks at her the wrong way. She's the type of girl that stalks the halls like the world personally owes her a life debt but she had gotten used to the fact she would never receive a reward.

And Lucas Sinclair, student body president, the school poster boy, which makes it even funnier that he and Max are dating because they're polar opposites.

In particular his eyes land on a face he got to know so well, and *he's* staring right back.

Will blinks to make sure his brain isn't making things up.

But this can't be real because Mike is supposed to be in Milwaukee. He had said good-bye to Will and then he was supposed to be nothing more than a hallucination. A summer memory that Will would try to forget about for the rest of his life because remembering would hurt too much.

It's him. It sure as hell is. Will doesn't know how or why, but the guy he's spent every free minute of the last two months with, the guy he maybe—maybe—more than *just* likes, is standing right before him.

"Mike?"

2. reunion

Summary for the Chapter:

"There was once an experiment conducted by Harry Harlow on monkeys. Harlow took a few infant monkeys and gave them two surrogate mothers, one made with wood and wire that provided milk, and one made with cloth and foam that provided only comfort. Even though one mother gave them what they needed, the monkeys still spent their time with the soft comfort of the other that gave them what they wanted. Mike thinks humans are like that too.

Except he isn't an experiment. He doesn't want recovery and he doesn't fucking want to be fixed. He wants comfort and familiarity. He wants Will."

Notes for the Chapter:

*warning for a blink-and-you'll-miss-it sexual innuendo.

He's too scared to look up, he can't do it, he can't, because this can't be real, there's no fucking way this is happening, it's just his mind tricking him with what he can't have—

He slowly, cautiously lifts his gaze.

And his eyes run smack into brown ones he thought he'd never see again.

Those brown eyes widen immediately, and that soft, pillowy mouth—

the same mouth that had tasted Mike's, not long ago—drops open in shock. “Mike?”

He gulps, torn between terror and elation, the urge to flee and the desire to launch himself at Will, to be surrounded by his warmth again. “Hi,” he murmurs. He tries to keep it nonchalant, but it comes out much quieter than he wants. Intimate.

“You guys know each other?” Lucas asks the burning question, his strong brow furrowed in confusion. Max and the two people beside Will look equally intrigued, their heads turning between them both like they're engrossed in a tennis match.

And Mike still hasn't taken his eyes off Will. Will looks as floored as he feels... but there's also a pleased flush sitting on his cheeks, his mouth twitching like a big smile is threatening to break on his face at any moment.

Mike is so fucking happy to see him, he feels sick of it.

But all it takes is one more glance at Max's puzzled frown, at Lucas—who he's known since they were twelve and he was sitting outside of the arcade bored, one particularly mundane summer—and the two teenagers standing beside Will all *watching him*— for the biting, ugly fear to come creeping back, high and tight in his chest.

“We hung out a few times over the summer.” Will finally says.

Try every day.

Every single day, for two months.

The curly haired boy nudges him and grins slyly. “You’re replacing us?” he asks, laughing. “What gives?”

“Wait,” his other friend looks between the two, squints her eyes as if she’s figuring out a piece of the puzzle and then pipes up, “Didn’t you say there was someone—”

Oh God. *Ohgodohgodohgod—*

Did Will say something—

She stops herself as the words come tumbling out, as if she realized what picture the words could paint, looking at Will with that pained *sorry* expression.

But Mike doesn’t really care too much in the moment—he knows he will in a few seconds—but now that Will is in front of him, real and alive, Mike wants to *touch*. To wrap Will up, to feel those arms tight around him, hold him close and breathe him in.

He’s starting to realize what that means, now. He knows... well. He thinks he’s known, for quite a while.

He does the only thing he knows how to do. He clams up.

“Dude,” Mike scoffs, even as his heart races and his face flushes with panic. “We smoked a couple times. I barely remember.”

If he could snatch the words out of the air and swallow them back down, he would.

But he can't. When he dares to look up at Will and sees the shock on his face, the disbelief, the hurt... the regret is so thick in his throat, he thinks he could choke.

But Will recovers quickly—if there was one thing Mike had learned about him over the summer was that he's an expert at masking his emotions. The chilly calm that settles over his face makes Mike feel even worse, somehow.

“Yeah,” he says casually, meeting Mike's anguished stare dead-on. “Nothing *special*.”

And then he turns and walks away.

He walks away, and Mike wants to cry. Wants Will to come back, *come back, please*.

He doesn't.

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Mike doesn't know if there's a God.

He thinks there might be one. He thinks his entire life is a cruel trick by someone who's pressed a pen to the page of the universe and written in blood ink. He wonders if God is sitting on a throne of bodies and watching his creations rip themselves apart limb from limb to stay alive.

He wonders if the sky is empty. He thinks it might be because he isn't loved anymore and his memories feel more real than he does. He thinks it might be because he exists and wishes he didn't. He hopes it is because if the world ends, he doesn't want it to come back.

He tells himself he's insane because his life is written in blood ink and he wants to scream at the sky and he wants it to scream back but he knows it won't.

He wonders if he's insane because he isn't enough for God or his dad or anyone for that matter. He thinks he might be.

It's his fault they moved—to get a *"fresh start"* after the *incident*. The

thing was: Mike still liked Charlie—who he thought was his friend—no matter what he did to him.

Will had asked him once if he'd ever been in love and he couldn't lie. Even if he wanted to.

There was once an experiment conducted by Harry Harlow on monkeys. Harlow took a few infant monkeys and gave them two surrogate mothers, one made with wood and wire that provided milk, and one made with cloth and foam that provided only comfort. Even though one mother gave them what they needed, the monkeys still spent their time with the soft comfort of the other that gave them what they wanted. Mike thinks humans are like that too.

Except he isn't an experiment. He doesn't want recovery and he doesn't fucking want to be fixed. He wants comfort and familiarity. He wants *Will*.

Great.

Mike quickly learns Will's friend Jane is an inherently suspicious, good-hearted person when she comes over to their lunch table and says only two words: *fix it*. Without even skipping a beat.

He's too tired and too desperate to question it.

So, Mike calls him.

He has no idea what he's going to say, and Will has exactly zero good reasons to want to hear him out—his crestfallen expression from a few days ago has been tattooed on Mike's brain ever since he let fear get the better of him, again.

“Hi.”

It takes an uncomfortably long time for Will to respond, and Mike is starting to think he's going to hang up for a second but finally, a reply—and Mike's heart gives a violent lurch, beating fast.

“Oh, so you remember me after all?”

Ouch. But also deserved.

He wants to apologize, he wants to grovel like a fool, he wants to say a thousand things. But not now. Not like this.

“...Can we meet at Mary's later?”

“*Fine.* Only if you're buying. Better make it worth my while.”

Mike huffs out a tiny, surprised laugh, and just a little bit of tension leeches from his shoulders. “Deal. Be there at 11:45. ”

The diner is old in a way that most stores along mainstreet are, with bright pink neon lights and a checkered floor in alternating black and white tiles that clash with the aqua blue leather booth seats and white dotted tables. It's a homage to the 50s—maybe it's that just that old—and Mike remembers when he, Lucas, and Max would come here sometimes. One summer—Mike calls it the summer of disaster—he was forced to choose sides when they broke up for the millionth time and that resulted in fries being thrown at his head. Not fun.

Mike walks in and the door chimes as his shoes hit the welcome mat. It smells like eggs and maple syrup, and it's barely busy, with only two other people sitting by the counter and a single waitress who looks just about ready to hit the hay.

11:39.

“Table for one?” she asks.

“Two, actually. Thanks.”

And he's sliding into a squeaky leather booth and being handed a laminated menu that's so glossy it reflects the cursive neon sign that reads “*Breakfast of Champions*.” He feels like he's 14 again. Or maybe it's just the day that's getting to him, the turn of midnight on the clock that brings him back.

11:43.

There's a jukebox set against the far wall, currently playing an old doowop song that Mike's too young to remember, and he watches it switch records, flipping one out for another then starts playing some pop song—Madonna he guesses.

11:48.

He checks the ticking clock on the wall above the serving window and sighs. It's a shock to the system, a punch to the gut, when Will strolls through the door.

He's still, just so fucking beautiful. So beautiful Mike can't be asked to come up with another word for it. A word that feels less like he's...

Just... *less* compared to Will.

For one blissful, brief moment, Will's face seems to light up when he first sees Mike. But it shuts off almost immediately, dull and impassive, and his chest tightens miserably.

"Hey," Will says, after a slow, cautious approach before taking a seat across in the booth. His hands fiddle with a loose thread of his hoodie, like they're desperate for a task to occupy them that isn't fidgeting.

Mike swallows. “Hi,” he croaks, overwhelmed by Will’s close proximity, familiar and intimidating in equal measure.

There’s a horrible, protracted bout of silence, then, during which Mike can’t quite bring himself to vocalize the million thoughts running through his head and refuses to meet Will’s questing eyes, finally, Will seems to grow tired of waiting, exhaling loudly and opening his mouth to speak. “Do you want to get a—”

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out suddenly. It’s almost involuntary, like Will broke the dam and he can’t physically hold it in any longer.

Will looks momentarily surprised, raising his eyebrows in question but ultimately keeping quiet, waiting for Mike to elaborate.

Knowing his luck someone would probably interrupt him and Will, just as they always seemed to do. It's like the world doesn't want the two of them to be alone together for more than a few moments. Maybe the universe is doing that for a reason, something you don't know and aren't meant to find out in the long run.

Stereotypical, Mike knew that this boy from the edge of town with his loud music and big dreams would only spell out trouble, but that's not all Will is. Sure, he can be loud and confident, but he can also be quiet and insecure. He's like a big ball of contradictions, and for some reason - unbeknownst to him at the time - that interested Mike.

“I was an asshole to you, before,” he says softly. It’s the most laughable, preposterous understatement of the century and Will seems to agree.

“Yeah,” Mike expected the confirmation, but fuck—it still sucks to hear it spoken so plainly. “You really were.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, his heart in his throat. He’s not sure he can possibly say it enough to assuage the guilt he feels, but he has to start somewhere.

“What was fuck that, anyway?” Will asks. He sounds genuinely curious behind that perceived angry tone.

“I don’t know.” Mike says, shrugging cheerlessly and looking down at his sneakers. “I just... panicked.”

He can’t bring himself to say what he was panicking about, and it’s clear from Will’s expression that he’s thinking about asking.

Max once said that suffering feels religious if you do it right. He wonders sometimes if she’s insane. He thinks she might be. She would get along with Will.

In the end, his face softens—just a touch—and he doesn’t press any further.

“It won’t happen again,” he promises, surprised by the vehemence behind his words. “Just... Give me another chance.” It’s a weirdly *romantic* thing to ask, and it makes him cringe.

“Chance at what?” And, well. That’s the question, isn’t it?

Mike gulps audibly, and he doesn’t know what he’s about to say until he’s already saying it.

“Anything.”

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In all honesty, things have been weird.

Awkward is more the word.

Apparently Dustin knows Lucas because they were paired up for a science project once back in sophomore year and Jane met Max over the summer and immediately hit it off. That means all of Will and Mike’s friends are friends with each other.

So, it definitely does *not* make it weird that they sit together at lunch—their thighs pressed up or the brush of Mike’s arm on Will’s—when he goes to steal a fry from Max’s lunch plate just to get her upset—does *not* make him feel anything.

Marsha's house is already a disaster area when they walk in.

People have been hyping up this party for weeks now, so Will's not really that surprised to see that some of them arrived a little pent-up and overzealous. He can immediately spot a broken vase and—by the look of it—liquor spilled on the sofa, and winces on her behalf.

But Will can't worry about that right now. He's here for one reason, and one reason only.

He and Mike hadn't exactly talked specifics during their date—or, well, whatever that was. But they had agreed that they'd see each other at the party, and that they'd talk. That Mike would (*try to*) explain why he acted like the world's biggest dick. That they'd attempt to pick up where they left off at the end of the summer.

Still, they haven't talked about it . Whether *that's* still on the table. Whether that's something Mike still wants.

Will has been looking forward to this all week, and he can't help but scan the top of the crowd pulse already fluttering at the idea of being near him again.

All in all it's been nice to sit with him at lunch, once the nerves had worn off—to shoot the shit about every topic, to reacquaint himself with Mike's smile, to bask in the joy that radiates from Mike in waves when he laughs.

To stare a little too long at the sharpness of his jaw and the delicate curve of his neck—drawing Will in like a moth to a flame. There's a kind of comfort in those sad eyes. There's a kind of comfort in the sizzling sadness that bares its teeth and bites. Something ungodly but also religious. The kind of comfort that only poems and music and promises of *I'll always be here* and *I wanna be yours* .

Mike looks like all the whispers of *yes* and *please* and *I wanna be yours* that are never spoken. He looks like ivory and prayers, and Will can't look away, despite himself, and he coughs up little white lies.

Lingering touches. Borrowed cassette tapes. Brown eyes. Howling laughter. Summer Vacation. Stupid grins. Pale skin. The way someone can appear so confident but is quiet and insecure instead.

He can barely acknowledge what *it* is... but he wants more of it. And right now, he really doesn't want to waste any more time thinking about the consequences.

Will waits until Dustin is off chasing Jane, Lucas and Max head to the backyard to smoke, to look for Mike in earnest. The lights are dim and Marsha's living room is packed to capacity with drunk teenagers, but it still doesn't take Will long to find him. Mike is awkwardly tall and stands out of a crowd, but he can't help but feel that they're attuned with one another. He doesn't quite know why the thought warms him so much.

There's thought to be a word for every feeling a person can have. An unending torrent of lexicon for every undying desire a person can possess. Something they yearn for, something they can't. A parable

between every whisper of *yes* and *please* and *I wanna be yours* spoken. There must be a word for every feeling a person can have. Will thinks this can't be true because there's not any word in any language to describe how he feels when he sees Mike's face.

As if to prove Will's theory, Mike's eyes immediately fix on him like he could sense him approaching, and the grin that spreads on his face threatens to buckle Will's knees.

He and Mike come together like magnets, the rest of the room fading into the background.

Will doesn't know if there's a God. He thinks there might be, because despite the infernal chain around his throat, he manages to choke out three months worth of emotion into a one-syllable word and it sounds like peace with angels and making deals with the devil. It sounds like suffering, and it feels religious. "Hi," he says, rather breathlessly. It would be embarrassing, if Mike wasn't looking at him with that tantalizing sparkle in his eye.

He wants to say something else or anything or everything, and every cell in his body is screaming to reach for Mike but he can't because Mike looks like ivory and prayers and Will doesn't know if there's a God and so he doesn't know if Mike is real but he prays he is because he needs a few more reasons to live.

Will wonders if the sky is empty. He thinks it might be, but how could it when there's the sun and the moon and cardinal birds? How could that be when Edgar Allen Poe wrote poems about being alone and those poems took the shape of people and now every word spells out *Mike*?

He likes the way brown and gold are in the same color family and the way champagne looks like pale skin. He likes that brown and gold both have one syllable and champagne and pale skin both have two. He likes the way they add up to six because it's six p.m. going on seven and Will has always wanted to die young but now he's starting to have second thoughts.

They're now inches apart. The distance feels gargantuan. Will feels like all the parables between brown eyes and pale skin and champagne and gold. Mike looks him in the eyes and it feels like lanterns lights and rose thorns and the whole of the moon. It's holy.

Maybe if he was prettier, he would be made of ivory too. But he's not.

Instead he's made of black coffee and bitten nails. And it's just not poetic and it never was. He's not very pretty. Edgar Allen Poe never would have written poems about him. Dante Alighieri never would have painted him. Mike would never love him.

Ivory. Ivory. Ivory. Mike is made of ivory and the dead poets and painters and musicians have spent their lives creating him. He's a golden mosaic of art and it's all perfectly whimsical. He would fit perfectly in the museums in Florence, amongst Michelangelo's sculptures and Boticelli's paintings.

He's art and he's golden and whimsical and he looks like Florence in July.

Will realizes he wants to go to Italy. Maybe Mike would want to come with him.

Mike gives him a smile, small and sweet, just for him. "Hi." His hands are shoved deep in the pockets of his denim jacket, and Will wants them on his body, instead.

"I'm glad you're here," he feels his face flush with the admission, even though it must be obvious just how happy he is to see him.

Mike just inches closer, keeps on smiling. "Me too," he says, just loud enough to be heard over the din of the party.

See, that's what I mean, Will thinks to himself. How can Mike appear both so confident and terrified of the slightest slip-up at the same time?

They stare at each other for a moment, eyes roving, too afraid to move and break the spell. Will is a mirrorball with shattered copper-stained glass but Mike keeps staring like he has all the secrets to the universe and Will doesn't want him to stop so he decides that the butterflies are worth the pain of hunger.

Mike is still looking at him and he decides to look back and they're staring at each other with all the whispers of *yes* and *please* and *what the fuck happened to us* and the whole room is swallowed by dusty rose and shining lights and shitty music and soft eyes.

Then Will hears an ominous crash in the distance, and it shakes him out of it.

“Do you want to go outside?” he asks, hopeful. The grin he gets in response makes his heart trip.

“I’d rather dance with you.”

Heat instantly zings through him at the idea of it—there’s no point in denying that he wants to. But it’s so easy to let his surroundings back in, to let the noise and the chaos creep back into his periphery. If he did that everyone would see. Everyone would know. Not just about him, but about Mike, too.

What he is. What *they* are.

“I...”

Mike seems to understand and places his hand on Will’s shoulder, a simple touch that races through Will like fire. Except Mike’s gaze lingers for a second too long and he’s starting to let his mind drift and it’s not healthy and he can’t dare to dream about him anymore but he can’t help it. Because Mike is made of ivory, and prayers, and it’s so holy. He wonders if the sky is empty because Mike is on earth.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” he says. “Think about it. I’ll be right back.”

And then he walks off, leaving Will dazed.

He stands there for a moment, frozen with indecision, a familiar fear gripping his insides when he thinks of all the ways being with Mike could go wrong... would almost *certainly* go wrong. He could become the object of school-wide ridicule, he could lose his closest friends, he could taint the vestiges of his relationship with his mother.

All the things that keep him awake at night, tossing and turning and sweating. Things that nip at the corners of his mind, rushed and quiet and restless in the dark.

...But then he thinks of Mike, and his bright eyes and gentle smile and strong, comforting hands. How beautiful he is when he's happy. How beautiful he is when he's sad. How he listened to Will, chose to care about him, when Will had already resigned himself to going through life alone. How good it had felt, the first time Mike hugged him close—so good, so incredibly good, there hadn't been any room to think about all the ways that it was wrong.

He's going to dance with Mike.

But if he's going to do this (*I want to do this, I have to do this*) he really needs a drink.

He forces his way through the crowd towards the kitchen, relieved to find it blessedly empty, and heads for the fridge.

“Hi, Will,” says a voice from behind him.

Oh, fuck.

He reluctantly spins around and—yup. Not good.

“Uh, hi, Eva,” he says, eyeing her warily. He hasn’t seen her in a while, not since their sham of a (non) relationship came to an abrupt end.

The two of them move in different circles and he was away all summer—not to mention he hasn’t exactly been keen to see her, after he unceremoniously dumped her when it all became too much. When he no longer had use for her as a method of getting his friends off his back.

Just add that to the long list of things he feels guilty about.

She smiles. “You look good,” and it should be nice to hear, but all he can think of is Mike. *Mike is waiting for me.*

“Thanks. You... look good, too.” She looks the same to him, really—and as much as it makes him an asshole, he was never really in it for her. There’s a lot about Eva he didn’t notice, even then.

She seems pleased by his words, anyway, a hopeful smile blooming on her face.

“I thought about you a lot over the summer,” she says bashfully, looking up at him. She probably thinks it’s alluring, and it probably would be, to most other guys.

This... is not good. Not good at all.

He glances at the door to the kitchen, so preoccupied with figuring out a way to quickly extricate himself from the situation that he doesn’t notice Eva moving closer.

“Listen. I—” he starts, but before he can fully register what’s happening, she’s right there, in his space, and her lips are pressing insistently to his.

It takes him a long, anguished moment to realize what she’s doing but when he does, his entire body freezes in shock, and his mind screams *not Mike, not Mike, not Mike*.

This is wrong, this is wrong, this can’t be happening—

He hears footsteps and it’s exactly what he needs to snap out of his horrified panic and push her away.

When he looks at the door, ignoring Eva’s surprised huff, he sees...
no.

It's Mike retreating back.

Fuck. Nonononono fuck fuck fuck—

"What's going on?" She's asking, but Will barely hears her—her voice is muffled, like he's underwater.

"I'm sorry," he says. "But *this* isn't happening." He can't waste any more time placating her now, so he flees the kitchen without looking back.

Will doesn't immediately see Mike when he surveys the top of the raucous crowd. Or when he checks near the stairwell. Or both of the bathrooms. Or the bedrooms. Or the backyard.

He looks and looks and looks, desperation and panic building, it doesn't matter how hard he looks though.

Mike is gone.

-

When Will gets to school on Monday, Mike passes him in the hallway

without a word.

Will would much rather Mike get up his face, and yell at him. Anything that gets him talking, gives Will the chance to explain what happened—what so clearly *didn't* happen.

But instead, there's brutal, cold indifference.

-

It's been going on like this for weeks, and Will is slowly losing his mind.

The scene plays again and again in his head on loop, and he oscillates between agonizing over each and every detail, to imagining all the things he could have done differently to avoid the outcome, and back to the tortured agonizing.

Rinse and repeat.

He spends his days staring pathetically at Mike from his seat in math class (Mike never looks back,) avoiding and ducking his friends' questions about who he hooked up with that night at Marsha's, because apparently rumors are flying.

He spends his nights lying awake, an unbearable summer highlight reel flashing through his head—

Mike's soft hand in his.

Mike's silky voice pitched low—smooth and silky.

Mike's hot breath fanning against his neck.

Mike's lips on his.

Mike, Mike, Mike .

He rarely sleeps, and when he does, he rarely sleeps well.

Something's got to give.

And it does, on a Friday night. Chrissy Daniels is hosting a movie night while her parents are out of town—she invites too few people for it to be considered a fully fledged party, but too many for any real movie-watching to take place. But there's lots of free alcohol, and Jane and Dustin flat-out beg Will to go with them.

After putting up minimal, halfhearted resistance, he gives in—he's barely seen them outside of school, lately, confined to his misery, and he's run out of viable excuses.

For some reason, he doesn't expect Mike to be there.

But there he is—seated on the couch, sandwiched between Max and some guy Will doesn't know. He's laughing at something with his head thrown back, and Will *aches*.

So... he proceeds to get supremely, ridiculously wasted.

He doesn't mean to, not at first at least, but once the booze kicks in, all buzzy and fizzy and warm, he chases the feeling. He drinks, and drinks, and drinks, until he stops feeling pangs in his chest, until the burden feels a little lighter.

It's the best he's felt in a while.

But unfortunately, he also forgets that alcohol never truly makes you forget your problems—if you drink enough, it only makes them loom larger.

So when Mike goes into the bathroom, Will follows him.

The door closes loudly behind him—he's too drunk and uncoordinated to think about dampening the noise—and he half

expects Mike to startle when he turns around but he doesn't. It's like he expected Will to do this, was ready for it.

"What do you want?" he asks, weary, almost sad. Will hates it, hates that he made Mike feel this way. That he's somehow managed to ruin the only thing in his life that made any fucking sense.

He exhales shakily. "Mike," he says, and it's almost a whisper. "Just listen."

"Why sh—"

"It wasn't what you thought," he pleads desperately, stepping closer, buoyed when Mike stills, but doesn't shift away.

Mike rolls his eyes, it's defensive, like he's covering up just how upset he is. "I know what I saw."

"It wasn't," begging him with his eyes to understand, as best he can. "It wasn't." He can't take the distance between them any longer so he closes it, and even though Mike is tense, he allows Will's hands to clutch his jacket.

"She kissed me, but I never..." He looks up, and his breath hitches when he sees Mike's clear eyes looking back. "I don't want- I only want you," he whispers, and he knows it's a bad idea but he can't help but burrow his face into the flesh of Mike's cheek, rubbing the heat of his own against soft, tender skin.

He feels Mike's throat bob when he swallows. "Will..."

"Please," Will implores softly. Mike is so warm and perfect and present, and he smells so good. Will presses his lips to the juncture where Mike's neck meets his shoulder, dropping a light kiss there like he's wanted for the past couple of weeks, stomach swooping when he hears Mike's breath hitch in response.

He knows that the alcohol is making him braver, but he can't bring himself to care right now.

He can only start kissing Mike's neck in earnest—sucking, open-mouthed kisses, tongue darting out to. He moans quietly at the vibrations against his mouth, hands unclenching from Mike's jacket.

Being close to him like this—Will can't believe he ever thought this was wrong, that this is something he had to deny himself. They fit together so perfectly, and Mike feels so amazing under his fingers, sharp masculine edges and soft, sweet curves all at once. Mike pants and groans at the feel of his searching mouth, his roving hands, and it makes him feel wild. Like he's losing control.

"Let me." Will murmurs, running his lips up to trace the shell of Mike's ear. And he's sliding his hand down, down, down, to where he's wanted to touch Mike for so long—since they first met, really—palm running the length of his torso and past his belt —

"No," he says suddenly, reaching down to gently brush Will's hand

away, shattering the moment entirely.

He isn't pushed, but Will still stumbles back, "No?"

Mike takes in a shuddering breath. "No," he confirms, and Will wants to cry.

"You don't want to," he says, voice small, and it's not a question.

At his words, Mike has the audacity to laugh. "Of course I want to," he scoffs, like it should be obvious. After weeks of the cold shoulder, of radio silence. "But *you're drunk*."

"I'm not *that* dr—"

"And plus," Mike barrels on, cutting Will off. "If I... if I were to walk back in there, and I was holding your hand. Do you think you could do it?"

The question catches Will off guard, the booze inducing a half-second sensory lag as his brain catches up with Mike's words. He tries to think about it—what it would be like to grip Mike's hand in his out in the open, to show the world what he is, under the intrusive stares of Lucas and Max, his friends, of Eva and all the rest of them. Of *strangers*.

He likes to think he could. He wants to say yes. But if he's being

entirely honest... he just doesn't know.

"I'm not the scared one here," the words come out venomous. "You lied to me," he laughs, bitterly. For the first time in weeks he's coming to that realization. Mike lied. He shouldn't be the one getting upset. He shouldn't be the one ignoring Will. It isn't fair. "You said you were leaving. And then... *what?* I find out you stayed by bumping into you at school? What your saying is bullshit because y-you didn't even call."

Mike takes a deep breath in, like he's bracing himself. "We had a change of plans. I didn't *lie* to you. My dad got transferred here from his job. You know that." It's another excuse.

"You lied — "

"I need more, right now, okay? I can't be a secret. After what happened last year, I need to know where I stand."

Will knows what happened to him last year. He remembers the night Mike told him, cool air skimming off the lake and kissing their faces where they sat on the sand, pockets of green grass poking out, crickets singing all around them as he laid out the story for Will in hushed, desperate tones. Will remembers, and his heart clenches at the reminder of it.

"Do you get what I'm trying to say?" he asks, eyes imploring.

Devastated, drunk, there's not much Will can do but nod.

Mike's mouth quirks, a small and resigned thing, before leaning in and brushing a feather-light kiss against Will's forehead.

"When you're ready," Mike says, pulling away completely, leaving Will shivering. "I'll be here."

And then he's watching Mike walk away.

Again.

Notes for the Chapter:

I try and write every day and update when I finish each chapter. I hope you're all enjoying this as much as I am. Please be gentle towards yourselves. Much love xx

3. interlude

Summary for the Chapter:

"During fourth period, a note lands on his desk.

WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM, it says, in all caps. The scribbled handwriting belongs to no one other than Max."

Notes for the Chapter:

tries to slide another chapter in there discreetly.

Will had never liked the fact that he was gay. He knew that there was no point in two men (or two women) loving each other romantically because they couldn't marry and have children anyway.

Even at 17, five years after realizing he liked guys a lot more than girls, he blamed it on puberty. A rebellious phase to piss off society by dating boys. But in the end he pissed himself off, too. He didn't exactly *want* to be gay. He wants to like girls and marry a beautiful woman and have a baby with her and die old with a big family by his side.

Mike taught him that it was okay to be gay. Because he could fuck with people just by being lovey dovey in public.

Mike taught him that it was okay to skip classes. Because school doesn't teach the right values.

Mike taught him that it was okay to steal stuff from big chain stores. Because capitalism is more of a crime than stealing from a store that

wouldn't even notice something was missing.

It takes about a month and a half for their friends to figure it out. They take it like it's the most normal thing in the world and Will couldn't be more grateful to have such awesome friends. But they can be a little irritating, and awfully persistent.

"It's not like that and you know it."

"So you're not in love with him?"

"That's irrelevant," Will says. "He's not into me."

Dustin looks at him with a deadpan expression. "Uh. You guys were together over the summer. Did you just conveniently forget about that?"

"I mean, no, but—"

"Will," Jane interjects, tone clipped, fixing him with an exasperated look. "He's obsessed with you."

"He is *not*."

When you're ready, I'll be here. Rings in the back of his mind. He

shakes it out.

“Jesus,” then, over her shoulder, she calls towards the bleachers, “Hey, guys c’mere.”

“Don’t,” he whines.

“I’m gonna,” she says, as Lucas and Max pause whatever conversation they were having to make their way over to where the three are sitting on the grass, homework of all kinds sprawled out in front of them.

“What’s up?” Lucas inquires, one hand hooked on his camouflage backpack.

“How does Mike feel about Will?” Jane asks them, bluntly.

“Oh, he’s so far gone.” Max replies, automatic.

Lucas nods along in agreement to the statement, like that's totally normal. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“He isn’t into me like that.” Will’s heart is beating way too fucking fast. “And I’m the Mike expert in this group, so.”

Dustin squints at him. "That doesn't really help your case."

"You're blinded by love." Max adds, and when she turns a certain way, Will can just about see the hookah poking out of her backpack. "He talks about you all the fucking time."

Jane huffs. "It's kind of getting out of hand."

"You're not my favorite anymore." Will responds to Jane, matter-of-factly.

"No shit. Mike's your favorite."

"That's different. He doesn't count," and he's met with four unamused expressions.

"Gee, I wonder why." Lucas deadpans.

"Dude, you haven't even seen the worst of it." Dustin says, standing up.

Will picks at the grass shards, but eyes still on his friend, "What are you doing?"

"My Mike impersonation," he says it like it should be obvious. He

clears his throat, and mumbles, “Will and I went to Mary’s the other night. Did you guys know that his favorite milkshake flavor is chocolate? He stole half of my fries, but I let him because he’s really cool and funny.”

“Okay, that was–” Will starts, but Dustin keeps going.

“He said he wanted to see some movie the other day, but when I checked the paper, it was only playing at the passion pit, and I can’t go to the passion pit with Will because my car’s being fixed, but I don’t want him to go to the drive-in with anyone else.”

“That’s not–”

“Have I talked about his birthmarks? He has birthmarks. They’re the best part of my day.”

“Shut up,” and Dustin doesn’t look like he’s going to, but then Mike walks out onto the field and waves at them.

“Hey, guys.” Mike looks around everyone skeptically. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” There’s a huge grin playing on Jane’s features as she says this. “Dustin was being dumb.”

“So dumb.” Will rolls his eyes really fucking hard, even by Will Byers’

standards.

He blushes, but then Mike makes a contented noise, as he sits on the ground, right beside him, so Will chooses to focus on that instead of whatever bullshit their friends are spouting.

-

Will and Mike are walking to trig when they first see the banner for the Homecoming dance.

“Oh,” Mike starts, and then turns to Will. “I kinda forgot that Homecoming’s, like, a thing.”

“Yeah.” He’s so fucking red it kinda feels like he’s been hit by a truck all the sudden.

“Do you...” he’s trying really hard to look anywhere but Mike in the moment. “I mean, were you thinking of going?”

He shrugs. “Maybe.”

Mike nods, and Will’s heart is speeding up just at that. “I was thinking maybe, too.”

“That’s cool.”

“Right.” Mike agrees, looking very determinedly at his feet.

“Well, if—” Will starts, but then Mike’s head shoots up, and suddenly he’s looking right into his eyes, which are really wide, and really, really brown.

“Yeah?”

His mind goes blank, and then he just sort of gapes, for a second, before he remembers what words are, and even then, all he can manage is, “I think I left something at my locker.” Which isn’t even true.

“Oh, okay.” Mike replies, and Will watches the way he deflates. “I’ll, uh, save you a seat.”

“Thanks,” and then he turns and walks away fast down the hallway, not even in the correct direction of his locker.

-

During fourth period, a note lands on his desk.

WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM, it says, in all caps. The scribbled handwriting belongs to no one other than Max.

He snakes his neck around to find Max looking at him, expectant. Will shrugs, but his face is definitely bright red.

“Byers,” a voice says, and Will turns around to see that his English teacher is standing right over his desk, holding out his hand.

Will sighs, handing over the note, and then shoots Max a glare.

The teacher opens the note, and his expression is some combination of shocked and horrified. “See me after class,” he says, after a second, and then looks at Max, who’s leaning back in her chair, unfazed. “You too.”

Will is about 90% sure his teacher thinks he’s a murder.

-

He and Max are late to lunch, because it takes them some time to talk their teacher down from calling the police, and by the time they walk into the cafeteria, Mike’s already sitting at Jessica Strome’s table.

“Stop glaring,” Max digs an elbow into his ribs. “It’s sad.”

"I'm not glaring," Will says, clutching his fork very tightly as Jessica Strome laughs way too hard and leans into Mike.

"Right, and you're *not* totally gone, and you *didn't* almost ask him to Homecoming today," She lets out a dramatic sigh. "Dude , what happened?"

He brings up his shoulders, in sort of a shrugging motion but doesn't go through with it, so it ends up just looking awkward. "I don't know, I just- I panicked. Like, I saw the sign, and he was right there, and I almost... asked him."

Dustin is staring between the two from across the table, taking a bite of his packed ham and cheese sandwich. "And that's... a problem?"

"Wh-yeah, no shit, it's a problem. It's Mike. I can't just ask him to be my date for Homecoming." Will thinks his logic is sound, but neither of his friends seem swayed.

"You very much *can* just ask him to Homecoming. You *should* ask him to Homecoming." Dustin looks up and gestures with his head towards where Mike is sitting.

Max nods her head along. "Yeah, like, right now, or whenever you can."

"Well, he's busy with Jessica, so," He looks to where he's pretty sure her hand is on Mike's knee, now. "And I'm pretty sure I'm gonna need

a couple hours to prepare myself if I'm actually gonna do this."

"It's just a question."

Will looks at her. "Max," he says, tone completely serious, "that might be the stupidest thing I've ever heard someone say."

"You think I'm the stupid one?" Her face is pinched, and he can tell she's offended, at this point.

Before Will responds, he steals another glance at the Strome' table, and finds that Mike is already looking at them. His eyes meet Will's, and he kind of lights up, so Will scrunches his face at him, and Mike sticks his tongue out in response.

"Yes." he replies plainly, not taking his eyes off Mike, and he can assume Max makes some big dramatic hand gesture by the way Mike laughs.

-

On his way out of the cafeteria, Mike grabs his arm.

"We should hang out, later."

“Okay.” His heart is racing a mile a minute for no real reason. “Stop by my place after school?”

“I’m gonna stop by my aunt’s first. But after.” Mike says, making this weird, intense eye contact with Will.

“After,” he echoes, and gulps, then wanders off to Biology.

-

Mike ends up staying for dinner with Joyce and Will, and then for a few hours afterwards, because his mom is convinced that Mike is a good influence, probably because everything about him radiates wholesome boy-next-door-ness.

It’s true in the sense that Will wouldn’t pay nearly as much attention in math as he does if Mike didn’t always bug him with the homework questions afterwards, but Will guesses that’s not quite what his mother means.

They’re on the porch now, not really talking, just sitting in the comfortable quiet of the night.

“So,” Will finally breaks the ice, “How’s the car?”

Will and Mike are working on Mike’s car in his aunt’s garage.

So far he's learned or gauged that Mike comes from a pretty wealthy family but doesn't care for it much, he has two sisters, one is older in college and the other going into the fifth grade. He and his family come to Hawkins every summer to visit. It's a tradition at this point.

"So, the car is systematic..."

"Hydromatic." Mike adds grinning, "Ultramatic too."

"What? What does that even mean?" He's laughing and Mike's looking right at him.

"That's what my old aunt Helen says. She knows."

"Yeah, okay. Just pretend you know what hydromatic means."

"It's automatic. That's all you need to know. Not really a muscle car, but still makes pretty good speed. Will burn up a quarter mile."

"So auto means no manual gear shifts right?"

Mike jumps in this time, pulling Will to the side of the car, and opens the door, "Yeah, come on I'll show you."

"This is what they call a 'four speed on the floor'," Mike toggles the gear lever, once they're inside, "which means the gearshift's mounted on the floor instead. But you can totally shift to manual too if you want, see," then he takes Will's hand without thinking and places it on the gearstick, his own hand covering Will's, "So you can control this... and the speed manually if you wanted to..."

They stay like that for a couple of tense seconds and then Mike kills the engine.

"She's coming along." Mike responds, shrugging, and smiling faintly. "The engine's gonna be any day now."

"Then it looks like we're gonna be back in business, soon," Will smiles at him, a bit sheepishly. "Where'd you think you'll drive first?"

"Depends on when she's done. Probably Mary's or something."

"Well, I've gotta be there, man. This is our car."

"It's my car," Mike rolls his eyes, but he's also smiling, a little bit.

"Yeah, so it's, like, at least 30% mine."

"Well then, where do you wanna go?" Mike questions, swinging his legs back and forth.

Will ponders it for a second, then: "Mary's seems cool."

Mike bumps Will's shoulder probably because he's being kind of a smartass right now, but Will just laughs and bumps him right back, and his heart does something funny as he watches Mike try not to laugh.

"Or we could catch a movie at the passion pit." Will says, the words falling out of his mouth.

Mike's head shoots up, and he looks at Will with wide eyes. "You'd... wanna go to the drive-in?" For a second, it looks like he's about to add something, but then he closes his mouth and looks at him, expectant.

"I mean," He tilts his shoulder up. "You'll have a car now. Y'know." He gulps. "For *driving*."

"Do you wanna invite everyone?" Mike asks. "Or would it be, like, a you-and-me thing?"

"Uh," Will starts, his mind short-circuiting all of a sudden, like this is a question on a test he didn't study for enough. "I could do either, I guess?"

There's a gap of silence, and the night is so quiet that Will is

legitimately concerned that Mike can hear how fast his heart is beating. The moment stretches to the point of suffocation. After a pause, he meets Mike's honest eyes and stutters out, "We'll figure it out when your car's actually fixed, I guess." Just because one of them needs to say something.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Mike agrees, looking back down at the ground. "Friday or Saturday night, after she's up and running. Let's plan it."

"For sure." He's trying to figure out how much shit he'd get for asking their friends to pretend to be busy that night when Mike speaks again:

"Unless it's *Homecoming* , I guess."

Will freezes, for a second, and he knows what he should say, what he *wants* to say, but if he picks up this line of conversation, he'll eventually have to ask Mike to Homecoming, and then Mike could say that *no*, or Mike could say *yes*, and—

"Weekend after, then," he can't meet Mike's eyes.

"Right." Will hears something like disappointment in his voice. "It's, uh, late, so I should probably go."

"Okay," And his voice is too small and pathetic for his taste, so he stands up as Mike does. "I'll walk you to your bike."

“You don’t have to.” He chastises quickly.

“Well, I’m gonna,” Will tucks his hands into his hoodie pockets, “I don’t want you to die on the way. My English teacher already thinks I’m a murderer.”

Mike does his *Will-is-being-ridiculous* face, which is a more normal face for him to make than the shy, blushy thing he’s been doing all night. “Why does he think you’re a murderer?”

“Mike.” He says it like it’s an explanation, even though he knows it isn’t one. “I’m not in the mood to be a murder suspect, so.”

“I’m pretty sure if you were with me, that would be more suspicious.” He shoots back, and they talk about what situation would be least likely to land Will in jail for a crime he didn’t commit the rest of the way to Mike’s bicycle.

“Well, thank your mom for me, again.”

“So polite.” Will smiles, and he means for it to come off as a chirp, but it sounds way too fond.

“I’m a good kid, haven’t you heard?”

Will puts his lips together and hums something softly at that. He doesn't tell Mike that he's thinking about those warm smiles and soft kisses, the calculated kindness, had all turned into *this*. Where they don't know what to say to each other anymore. Where they don't know how to approach the other without sticking a chord, or trying so desperately hard to not break that barrier of everything that happened between them.

He remembers that time, just four months ago when they'd been fooling around and seeing each other every day. When he had enjoyed the attention. "I bet you'll go all greaser on me once you get a car."

"I'd go for the whole look too." Mike hums, grinning. "The leather jacket and everything."

"You'd look like a square." Will teases even though he's picturing Mike in a leather jacket and sunglasses, and he kinda thinks that Mike would look good, but that's probably because he thinks Mike looks good no matter what he wears.

Mike hesitates, opening his mouth, but instead snaps it shut just as quickly, before his running fingers through his hair, but that uncharacteristically dorky smile doesn't fade for a second. "Get bent."

Then he swings a leg onto his bicycle, nods at Will once, and takes off.

“Jessica asked me to Homecoming,” Mike says on the way to trigonometry the next morning. The words come out all at once, so it’s a second before they really hit Will.

“She... asked you?” Will asks, dumbstruck.

“Yeah,” Mike says, running a hand through his hair. “I mean. I didn’t, like, give her a definite answer yet.”

“What’re you gonna say?”

“I mean, I guess it depends?”

“On what?”

Mike shrugs. “Just—what do you think?”

“I don’t know. I mean, do you like her?”

“I *guess*? Like, as a person, she’s fine.”

“Well, then, if you wanna, I guess...” Will’s voice trails off.

“I don’t know if I want to.”

“Well,” Will breathes out, walking into the classroom. “I guess you should figure that out?”

“Yeah,” Mike says, his brows pinched at the center, and they make their way to their desks, same as always, but a knot is forming in Will’s stomach.

Will doesn’t take notes in trig. He can’t take any notes for the rest of the day, and can’t focus on school at all, too busy thinking about last night, and Mike, and how he’s blown it twice now.

He feels like he’s going to puke, and he feels like an idiot, and he feels like he wants to throw a milkshake on Jessica, which isn’t the nicest thing in the world, because Jessica didn’t do anything wrong.

It’s just... it’s not easy, asking someone to a dance, especially when you really like them, and Will *really, really, really* likes Mike, and if Jessica was able to just ask Mike, she probably doesn’t like Mike as much as he does. Well, probably no one likes Mike as much as he does, because he firmly believes that Mike Wheeler is out of everyone’s league, and he should go to Homecoming with someone who recognizes that.

Jessica Strome most definitely does not recognize that.

“You know you can’t kill Jessica.” Lucas says to Will, who’s hanging

out under the bleachers, because he'd seen the back of a head that vaguely resemble Mike's at Jessica's table during lunch and couldn't deal with it.

There are a few guys smoking a few yards away, and Will's never particularly been into nicotine, but he's tempted to bum one anyway, because he feels like angrily flicking ash off the end of a cigarette is marginally less pathetic looking than cross-armed moping.

"He wants you to ask him." Lucas continues, despite the halfhearted groan. The rational part of his brain is telling him to listen to Lucas, he is Mike's best friend after all, he'd know. But, he chooses defiance instead. "I'm pretty sure you're the only one who thinks he'd say no."

"Well, if he wants to go with me so badly, maybe he should ask me himself."

Jane interjects, giving him a pointed exasperated look. "Clearly he won't, because neither of you are capable of not being stupid about this."

And Will knows this is just how they are, and it honestly sometimes is helpful, but right now, he doesn't have the energy to deal with it, because Lucas and Jane just— they don't get it, and they're so convinced they do.

"I'm taking off." Will says abruptly, and they both look caught off-guard.

“ *What ?*”

“ *You’re just leaving ?* ”

“Need some space to think.” Before he can hear anymore he ducks out from under the bleachers and makes a break for the parking lot, past some couple making out, which is really the opposite of what he needs right now, quickly unlocking his bike and pedaling off.

4. finale

Notes for the Chapter:

*tiny warning for slight sexual innuendos.

“We should probably talk.” Mike says to him, as soon as they’re out of the classroom.

“Probably.” Will echoes as they walk down the cramped hallway, side by side.

“I mean, I also– I’m not actually going to Homecoming with Jessica. That was dumb, it was– she was scheming. I guess. Trying to make someone jealous.”

“I... sorta figured.” He shrugs like the thought of Mike tossing him aside like a piece of rotten Halloween candy wasn't keeping him up the previous night before.

“Do you wanna–” Mike starts, and then takes a breath. There's a beat. A steady silence for just the smallest of moments. “The car’s ready so we can go pick her up, and then talk. If you want.”

“It’s ready?” Will asks.

“Since Saturday.” He scratches the back of his neck. “So, do you... want to?”

Will gets lost in Mike's eyes, but it's only for a second, before he clears his throat and nods. "Yeah, of course."

"Cool," Mike says, smiling, and on pure instinct, Will smiles back.

Will spends the rest of the day writing notes to himself about things he should tell Mike, and he feels kind of dumb, until he shows up to lunch to find that Dustin and Jane aren't there, because they're having a *conversation*, *alone*, according to Lucas and Max.

The way Max raises her eyebrows and the wiggling of Lucas's Will can tell what about, though it doesn't come as much of a surprise. If he can remember correctly Dustin's had that crush since the day he introduced him and Jane all the way back in elementary school. Even though he'll tease them about it in the future and roll his eyes when they get a little too comfortable about it around him, ultimately, he's happy for them.

But nevermind that at the moment; Will has notes. Lots of them.

He has things he wants to say, questions he wants to ask, topics he thinks they should address in their conversation, and he's all set to outline all of it for Mike, except then, he actually sees Mike waiting by the bike rack after school, and it all just sort of seems... unnecessary.

"Nice shirt." Will says as he unchains his bike, because he's been thinking about it all day.

“Thanks. Nice enough to get you to take me to Homecoming?”

He pauses and blinks, and for a second, he's half convinced he's heard wrong, but then Mike starts to run his hand through his hair, like he's nervous, and it's definitely real.

“That was a bad idea.” Mike says, biting his lip, a nervous little habit Will has noticed over the last few months. “We're supposed to talk first. You don't actually have to answer.”

“How did you do that?”

“I'm impulsive, apparently. At least that's what Max says.”

“She gets specific with you. Mostly she just tells me I'm dumb.”

“She tells me that too.” Mike replies as they start to walk.

“I don't think we're dumb.”

He shrugs, casually. “We aren't usually, I guess, but this Homecoming stuff has been...”

“Yeah.” Will tilts his head. “Fair enough.”

“Why’d you ditch?”

“Jessica asked you to Homecoming,” he says, and then shrugs.

“I wasn’t gonna go with her in the first place. *That’s* why I brought it up to you at all.”

“Oh,” is all Will can get out.

“I thought– it seemed like you were gonna, in the hall, and then I tried to bring it up again when I went over to your place, and you just– I don’t know.” He shrugs. “I figured I’d give you an in.”

“And I didn’t take it.” Now he’s left feeling like the village idiot.

“You ditched school last week and got grounded. You, like, opposite of took it.” Mike continues. “I was just mad ‘cause– but I guess I shouldn’t’ve assumed you were gonna ask me, but you kind of made it seem like you were going to.”

“I–” He stops walking, looks at the ground, and takes a deep breath. “It’s not like you were wrong.”

“What?”

“I was gonna ask you, but I chickened out,” he can feel his heartbeat thumping in his ears. “Like a lot.”

“Why?” Mike asks. “You’ve gotta– you knew I wanted you to ask me, right?”

“I mean, I didn’t know that for sure.” It sounds so stupid coming out of his mouth. “I guess I just figured you expected me to.”

Mike turns on him, brows quickly threading together. “Is that why you were gonna ask me?”

“No! I just–” There’s about a million things he wants to say. A million things he *should* say.

“You just what?” he sounds the smallest bit breathless.

Will starts walking again, keeping his eyes fixed on the handlebars of his bike; his voice is dry, no traces of humor to be found. “We’re getting to the part where Max thinks I’m dumb.”

Mike gives him a flat, unimpressed look. “Because you wanted to go to Homecoming with me?”

“Because I want a lot of things.” Will responds slowly, and then adds, “With you.”

“Oh,” and there’s less dread in it than Will ever expected there to be. There’s no dread at all, really, just sort of... awe? Will thinks?

So, Will continues, looking into Mike's eyes. “And it’s not just the passion pit, or Mary’s, or just– it’s not *just* anything, I guess.”

“You’re saying you wanna go on a date with me?” Will looks up to see that he’s giving him a small, crooked smile, but his face is flushed, pale cheeks now tinted a fine shade of pink.

“Yes and no,” is what he ends up mumbling.

Mike squints, brow furrowed. “What does that mean?”

“I wanna... be your guy,” he thinks about it, mulling over the answer, “But I don’t want things to get weird.”

“I get what you’re trying to say.” Mike says, and then he puts his hand on top of Will's. “I wanna be your guy too. If that helps.”

His heart flutters at that. “You do?”

“ ‘Course.” Mike says, softly bumping Will. “You’ve always been my favorite.”

“*Oh*,” his voice is giddy, and he feels himself start to quirk his lips upwards of a smile. “Good to know. But what if–” he starts, and then bites his lip. “What if I’m a bad date?”

Mike stops in his tracks, then turns to Will and looks at him like he’s just said something completely ridiculous. “What?”

“I’ve never been on a date before. What if I mess it up?”

Mike shakes his head, disbelieving. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Right. Will sighs. He scuffs his shoes on the sidewalk, looking down when he speaks up again, “Why’s that dumb?”

“We’re already good together,” he says it like that’s the obvious part. Which it is, except Will didn’t know that Mike was thinking of things that way, so it’s kind of a revelation.

“So we’d still get to be friends?”

“We’re always gonna be friends. That’s the whole point to it, right?”

“So it’s not like we’ve gotta trade in our old set of wheels for a new one?” Will asks. “Just adding some chrome-plated rods to the machine we have now?”

“Yeah.” Mike looks at him, smile slanted, and shrugs. “I’d say it already runs pretty good, right?”

“For sure.”

“So,” Mike says, turning to face him. “We can just... hit the gas and go on this.”

“No more weird drama? Just us?”

“Yeah. Just us.” Mike nudges him again. “Maybe we’ll share a milkshake.”

Will rolls his eyes but affectionately, a smile threatening to break out once more. “Probably gonna go to Homecoming, too.”

“And the drive-in,” he adds on quickly. “We’re definitely going to the drive-in.”

“Didn’t know you liked movies so much.” With a quick glance around—they both take—Will finds the block is empty. He accentuates the words by putting a hand on Mike’s arm and tugging him closer.

"I'm not really in it for the movie," and then he leans in and kisses Will, because he's deceptively smooth, and Will wouldn't expect anything less.

-

Once they're on the road, Will says, "So, Mary's?"

"Yeah," Mike shrugs, hands on the steering wheel. "I wanna show off."

"What, your car?"

"Nope," he says, popping the 'p' sound, and then he smiles. "All you, baby."

"*Don't* call me that." Despite his order he smiles, and Mike glances over at him, blinks, then makes a turn that is definitely not in the direction of the Diner.

"What're you doing?" Will laughs, as Mike puts the car in park.

"Figured we should check out the back seat," he says, nodding toward it.

Will gives the tension-clearing laugh that Mike is looking for. He has wide-eyed speechlessness in the place ideas are supposed to go. "You think I'm that easy?"

"I know I'm that easy." He pauses, as if to reassure Will it's no big deal. So, *that's* perfectly normal. "For you, anyway." Mike looks at him, eyebrows up, mouth slightly open.

His brain is full. It happens that fast sometimes, the tilt from fine to overwhelmed. Naming your feelings is good in theory, until they roll up to you in a human body, talking and expecting you to do something about them. And no matter the context, it always feels like a little too much.

"Thought we should get that out of the way," Mike is saying, his voice inching higher, bravado still laced in his tone, but he's quiet all the sudden. Looking out the window like the *picture* of pious innocence. Mike chews on that for a beat. The expression on his face is now wary. Embarrassed. Almost sorry for even mentioning it. "Didn't want to start, like, *a dynamic*. You know what I always say, no dynamics any time."

At school, sometimes their math teacher would ask a question and go dead quiet, waiting in silence until someone responded. Mike is always the first to break.

Will looks at him. He gets the funny version of Mike, the version that's quick and bright and not canned at all. He gets the version of Mike who will say something like it's nothing, but then scramble to adjust the meaning just in case. Maybe there's a part of Mike that

Will doesn't know at all, but Will thinks, briefly, of what it means to know the taste of someone else's tears.

I know you, he thinks. I know what you're thinking, because I know you.

Mike is something that Will *wants*. He wants it the way he wants food when he's hungry, or rest when he's tired. He wants it so bad it aches, sometimes, but he's been telling himself that's okay. He's used to the feeling of wanting, detached from object or relief. At least this time he knows what he wants, and he knows the wanting isn't going to disappear.

The thing between him and Mike is a renewable resource. It is, Will has assumed, permanent and immovable. And that means it's okay to avoid. As long as it's inconvenient to talk about it, Will doesn't have to face it head on.

But now he's in Mike's car, sitting in the passenger's seat. Mike is here, right in front of him, in Hawkins. He isn't three hundred miles away and the thing Will thought was self-sufficient was actually starving.

He needs to say it out loud. If it's real, he needs to say it. That's how you make it real; real in a way people can understand.

The problem with this thing is that it's too big to be seen. Will isn't sure where it begins or ends. He isn't sure if it has its own shape, or if the reason he couldn't see it before is because it wraps to the contours of his life. What are the words for something like that? It kinda feels like he's got something stuck in his throat, but he

swallows it, pushes it down, and opens his mouth.

“Mike,” he says, feeling helpless. “I don’t know how to talk about this.”

Mike gets the conversation has shifted. He always does. “If we never did. Would that bother you?”

That’s not an eventuality Will has really considered, and the idea makes him feel leaden. “Yes,” he replies, easy. “I want to. I’m trying.”

And Will decides this is a moment when he can be brave, and takes it.

He’s holding Mike's hand now.

“I’m not trying to fuck with you,” he tells Mike. “I’m trying to be honest here. When I say I don’t know how, I mean I don’t know how.”

“Dude.” Mike's voice is different now; softer. “Start anywhere.”

Anywhere is too big. Will closes his eyes, breathes deeply, and thinks of the simplest thing he could possibly say. “You,” he says, opening his eyes. “are important to me.”

Mike stares at him, and breaks into a grin.

“Don’t laugh. I’ll go right back into my shell, I swear to god.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“You better not be, ‘cause I’m about to douse this whole thing in cold water.”

Mike sobers.

He takes another deep breath. *You ready?* he asks himself. The hand that’s holding Mike's shakes a little. He squeezes tighter.

Mike is now looking at him with clear concern in his eyes. “Will?”

“I’m *fine* .”

“Can I... how can I help?”

The question makes Will want to laugh, or maybe cry a little. Mike's eyes are just so wide. “I’m sorry.”

“What? No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to— I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. We don’t have to do anything.”

“That’s— You’re not. I’m just doing it myself.”

He’s aware of Mike watching him calm himself down, but he doesn’t expect him to comment on it. “I know, like, six or seven hundred breathing strategies. If you ever wanna compare notes.”

Will’s breath comes out in a little huff, half a laugh and half a noise of surprise. “Do you?”

“Course I do. You think I can just talk to people without feeling like my nerves are being set on fire? Me?” Mike laughs skittishly. “My hands are sweating right now.”

“I thought that was me.”

“Whatever. It’s all commingling.”

“Gross.” It is gross, objectively, but it’s not *that* gross. “I’m just nervous.” The most laughable understatement of the century.

“I’m— me too. Constantly.”

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I— I don’t wanna be a mess like this, I just feel like.. I’m getting a grip on things for the first time ever, and sometimes I do okay, but other times I wake up and have no fucking clue what to do with myself. And I don’t want you to know that. But I’m not— fun. I’m not great to be around.”

“I wanna be here.” Mike says urgently. “Nowhere I’d rather be. I mean that.”

Will drops his head forward.

“All good?”

He picks his head back up. “I just keep realizing how much I’ve been screwing you around.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

Will lets go of Mike's hand long enough to wipe his palm on his jeans against his knee, and then takes it again.

“It feels like I’m so far behind.”

“Compared to who?”

Will thinks about saying compared to Jane or any one of their friends, but that's not really it either. Compared to the person he used to hope he was gonna be. The Will Byers who existed in the imagination of that little kid, when any other possible version sounded like an improvement.

"There's no one else here." Mike pauses. It lingers in the air for just a second. "It's just us."

"I'm so fucking embarrassed." It comes out as a whisper. "It took me so long to do this. Everyone could see it, but I just couldn't do it."

"It doesn't matter." Mike's voice is strong with certainty. "It literally does not matter at all. You're fucking brave."

Mike believes in him so completely. Will isn't sure if he deserves it.

"I'm really glad you're here," he says. "I'm sorry."

"Quit apologizing. It's okay. We're gonna figure it out."

He realizes what Mike's doing, steering them past the thing he thinks is too much for Will in his current state. It's not completely right, but it does make Will's chest ache, to understand that Mike is instinctively looking for ways to take care of him. "Yeah. I guess you're right."

Then arms clutch onto him tightly. He hasn't been held like this by someone before. Once or twice, only to the point of plausible deniability, but not this. But he feels different with Mike's arms around his shoulders. But it's not the terrifying loss of control he'd imagined. It feels like the place where his body is supposed to be.

He hasn't really accounted for this, the possibility that the change might be a return to a natural path, even if making the shift itself goes against all the old instincts.

He's realizing he's more all right with it than he previously thought.

-

Later, they're sharing a milkshake, and Mike is running his arm up and down Will's thigh, which would be great, but they're in public and also in a staring contest which Will wants to win, even if it's mostly just an excuse to look into each other's eyes.

"Oh my god," a voice says, Will blinks, and Mike lifts his hands up in victory.

"You made me lose," he turns to look at Jane, who's sitting down at a nearby table. "Now he's paying for the shake."

"I was gonna pay anyway." Mike says. "It's only fair."

Jane laughs as she approaches the table. “Why did I ever think you two going steady was a good idea?”

“I think it’s your best idea yet.”

“Ditto.” Will agrees, and then he looks at Mike, and they smile at each other for a second.

“Gross.” Jane wrinkles her nose. “Cute, but *gross* .”

Will figures it’s her way of saying congratulations, so he beckons her, “Sit with us.”

“I can give you a ride later, if you want.” Mike tacks on.

“Thanks, but I’m not going anywhere near the backseat of that car right now.” Jane replies, but she slides into the booth anyway, and when their friends end up joining them a few minutes later, they rearrange themselves so that Mike and Will end up pressed together, which is pretty ideal for both milkshake sharing purposes and hand-holding purposes—under the table.

But, all-in-all, it’s probably one of the best afternoons of Will’s life.

"You know we could just go see a movie in the theater."

"Are you *seriously* comparing theater movies to the drive-in's right now?"

"Can't compare shit you don't know nothing about," Mike mutters, looking out the window.

Will is hit in the moment by how sheltered Mike's childhood actually was. But Will's not thinking about shooting guns or doing drugs. Will's thinking about stuff like this. Going to the drive-ins. Camping or going to the carnival. Hell, Mike's never even been to a baseball game.

Will feels like Mike was robbed growing up. Maybe they both were—in different ways. It's not like his family did stuff like that either or had a shit ton of money like Will knows Mike's does or anything, but they saved up enough to have those types of experiences together, when they could.

No one in Mike's family gave enough of a shit to even think about that kind of stuff. Normal things you do with the people you love, to make memories. Experiences to have together.

So Will is going to take it upon himself to give those things to Mike.

Will stays quiet as Mike backs into a space in the middle of the viewing field. There's an appeal to being somewhere like this, where

no one knows them or cares enough about what they're doing.

Two guys on a date. Imagine that.

Once Mike kills the engine, Will gets out. He walks around to the back of the car, opening up the door to get to all the stuff they'd packed. Blankets, pillows, a bottle of Jack, some chips and candy.

He let's down the back seat and lays the blanket flat along the surface. It isn't a huge space, but it'll be enough for the two of them. Close quarters never bothers Will, not where Mike is concerned. He hops into the back of the car and gets comfortable on his stomach, pillow wedged under his chin. Mike jumps in next to him, crawling over the front seat to tune the radio to the appropriate station before setting himself down next to Will.

"Have you seen either of these movies?" he asks, pointing toward the giant screen.

Will thinks about it as he rummages around in the backpack, fishing out the skittles and tearing into them. "Roger Rabbit, no, but Texas Chainsaw is a Byers' classic. Me and my brother stole the VHS from Blockbuster when we were little. Used to watch it on repeat when the cable got shut off."

Mike chuckles, holding his hand out for some candy. Will rolls his eyes, but nonetheless dumps some candy bits into his hand. "I love Leatherface. So badass. Kills all those people, never says a word."

"He's alright." Mike shrugs. "Freddy was always my favorite. You can't beat that glove, man. That shit was scary. Not to mention he was fucking hilarious. Those one-liners always killed me. *Get it? Killed me?*" he laughs, poking Will in the side until he's squirming and laughing along.

This is his Mike. The one no one else ever gets to see. Relaxed and happy, just shooting the shit. No pretenses, no bravado.

They lay there a while longer, on their stomachs facing the blank screen, waiting for the sun to go down. More cars pull in, but none too close to them. The drive-ins aren't as popular as they used to be, so the place is nowhere near capacity.

By the time it's dark enough for the previews to start, they're both pretty buzzed. He can't see any of their neighbors anymore, just the outlines of their cars, and the random little kid running around every now and again. They're pretty much alone. He pushes a little closer to Mike, feeling the heat radiating off his body.

-

"I just don't get the appeal. I mean, is this what straight guys go for?" Will motions toward the screen with the half empty bottle of booze.

"I don't know but Jessica Rabbit seems to tick all the straight guy boxes, right?"

"So, are you super into this animated bullshit, or can we fool around now?" Mike waggles his eyebrows, but the effect is kind of lost in the darkness of the space.

Before he can gather his scattered thoughts Mike has his mouth on his, teeth and tongue playing with Will's lower lip, coaxing him to open. He sighs into Mike's mouth and lets himself sink into it, the slightly uncomfortable position and fear of discovery disappearing with every press of Mike's lips against his own. His lips are sticky with skittles and his tongue tastes like whiskey.

It's always zero to a hundred with them. Slow build up is a concept they've not yet mastered. He bites down on Mike's bottom lip, swallowing his gasp and pushing his tongue further into his mouth.

In these moments, nothing else exists. The drive-in fades away to nothingness. The carfulls of people and the couple of screaming children running around evaporate into thin air. Any issues they may have in their everyday lives just don't matter as they succumb to their desires. Drowning in their need, wallowing in their shared pleasure. It's like a fire burning between them, consuming them whole.

As the evening goes on they watch the intermission cartoons, laughing at the old animation and silly antics. By the time Texas Chainsaw starts, they're both feeling a little tipsy, and a lot happy.

"I have to admit." Mike says, titling his head. "This isn't the worst idea you've ever had."

It's just them wrapped up in each other in a way they haven't been able to manage since Mike officially moved, losing himself in the sound of their mouths meeting again.

Only Mike can do this to him, only Mike can reduce him to nothing more than an overeager teenager. The thought of getting handsy in the back row of a drive-in while the sounds of blood curdling screams play through a tiny speaker should be embarrassing, even laughable. Instead, it's sweet and nearly innocent, the most pressing thing on their minds - each other.

Later, when Mike's hair is mussed beyond repair and sporting a purple mark on the crest of his collarbone, Will rests his head on his shoulder as the last of the movie plays.

He feels drunk on happiness as he watches Mike, admiring how the flickering light of the giant screen plays over the curves and edges of his sleepy face.

Eventually he drags his attention back to the movie and thinks to himself that he has everything he needs right here, wrapped up in the drive-in lights and Mike.

(Epilogue:

They're standing awkwardly at the edge of the dance floor, sipping punch and listening to the band play yet another slow song they can't dance to together, when Mike clears his throat and turns to Will. "So, Homecoming is..." he starts, his voice trailing off just as the song does the same.

"Kinda... boring?"

“Yeah.” Mike says, shooting Will an apologetic look. “I forgot that I don’t actually like dancing.”

“Really isn’t our scene.” Will agrees. “Wanna leave?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

They end up hanging out in the parking lot. They’re in the backseat of Mike’s car, with Mike’s head in Will’s lap as he runs a hand through his hair.

Will can hear other people walking around the parking lot, smoking a cigarette or catching up with friends, and the music from the gym is loud enough that it reaches Mike’s car on the far end of the lot.

It feels like they’re the only two people in the world, in the best possible way.

The opening notes of *Heaven Is A Place On Earth* play, and Mike smiles. “I like this song.”

“You wanna go back in?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. I’m good here,” he closes his eyes, and after a second, Will realizes that he’s humming. Mike looks up at Will, grins, and shrugs a shoulder. “It’s a nice song.”

“Guess so.” Will says, and Mike sits up a little bit, grabs Will’s collar, and pulls him in for a kiss. They reach out to touch the other and find belonging in the absence of breath, warm skin, and a heartbeat.

They separate only because of the dangerous lack of air but are still close enough to be able to feel the other’s breath on their blushed cheeks.

“Too cheesy?” he asks, giving Will a small, crooked smile.

“Perfect amount of cheesy,” Will responds, and Mike looks content as he lies back down.

“Cool.”

“Cool,” he replies and closes his eyes to listen as Mike begins to hum again.

It's something that no one can describe, the way he feels for him. It feels like a beating heart, realizing for the first time it's love; while never breaking. Mike makes him feel like he can hear words; his soft voice. Will opens his eyes to stare deeply into Mike's.

Mike smiles at him, then leans forward, brushing their lips together in a gentle, melting kiss that confirms his heart's question.

I am not brave.

Will lets out a small laugh, cheeks flushing ever so slightly pink as he tries to avert his eyes but Mike gently nudges Will's gaze back, to meet the sincere look on his face.

But you make me feel like I can be.)

Notes for the Chapter:

And thus my extremely self indulgent little fairytale of a fic comes to a close. Thank you to everyone who has read this far! I hope you enjoyed as much as I enjoyed writing it. I would love to hear what you think !!

As always, any and all comments and kudos are appreciated and well received.

Be well and take care of yourselves. xx